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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the evaluation of a pilot project in Wake County (North Carolina) to improve the achievement of at-risk black male students in grades 6-8 by linking them with supportive black adult-male role models from both the school and the community. The project is designed to overcome the following developmental barriers: (1) lack of a male role model; (2) confused relationships with females; (3) low school involvement; and (4) poor skills development. Students are targeted on the basis of declining achievement test scores, but they must demonstrate potential for academic success and the personal strength to resist negative influences. Each student is matched with a "personal model," a black male educator who develops a plan to improve the student's school work in cooperation with the student's parents and teachers, and a "community model," an employed black male who focuses on developing peer relationships, success at school, and leadership. The following evaluation results are reported: (1) 88 percent of the participants maintained enrollment and regular attendance in the program; (2) 87 percent of the participants maintained or improved their conduct; (3) 88 percent of the participants identified and met one or more behavior and/or performance goals weekly; (4) 95 percent of the participants improved their school attendance; and (5) 65 percent of the participants maintained or improved their academic performance. Statistical data are presented in one graph. Brief profiles of three participants are appended. (FMW)

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School/Community Hand Project

Summary

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Helping Hands: A Pilot Project

Traditionally, the development and academic achievement of black male students have lagged behind that of their female and white counterparts. The Wake County Public School System has initiated an innovative effort aimed at reversing that trend and helping black male youngsters take full advantage of learning opportunities.

Called the School/Community Helping Hands Project, the pilot program is the brainchild of Superintendent Robert E. Bridges and resulted from his eight years of research into the achievement levels of young black males as compared with other groups of students. The program teams the resources of school and community to offer black male youths unique help toward success in school and in life.

Sturdy role models, first from the school and then from the community, are paired with students in grades 6-8 who have the potential for success in school, but who, for whatever reason, are not reaching their potential and are at risk of school failure. Counteracting the negative influences which hinder the black male student's development is one of the key goals of the program.

The obstacles black males face in their developmental process can be witnessed across the nation. The black male child represents

one of the "at-risk" groups that require special assistance and motivation to succeed in school. Innovative, effective model programs will be instrumental in ensuring that all students reach their potential. Initial reactions signal that Helping Hands has the potential for becoming a national model for motivating and enhancing the achievement levels of black male youth.



*Helping Hands
creator Robert E.
Bridges believes
"youngsters must
have role models to
grow by."*

Black Male Child: Obstacles to Development

When the black male child reaches that critical stage in identity formation and looks in the environmental mirror asking the question "Who am I?", the response frequently tends to instill a low self-concept and the acceptance of a nonproductive standard of living. Unfortunately, the black male child is forced to grow up facing this negative environmental mirror and often falling victim to a network of negative factors.

Wake Superintendent Bridges over an eight-year period has conducted both formal and informal observations and studies of black male child development. Through this process he identified four key, negative factors hindering the developmental process of the black male. Those factors are as follows:

■ **Lack of role model.** The absence of a sturdy, contributing male parent in a majority of black families denies the child a readily accessible, adult male role model to influence his development in a positive manner. The black family structure has eroded to the point that 55 to 60 percent of all black families in America are headed by females only. Too frequently, the black male is not available, unprepared, or unwilling to assume the responsibilities of fatherhood or manhood in a broader sense.

■ **Relationships with females.** The black male child experiences perplexing, fluctuating relationships with females which hinder identity formation and development of the child. From the wide-ranging influences of mother or grandmother to the expectations of lover and wife, the black male is typically torn by contradictory signals. One such example results when many black male youths are forced too early to serve as the "man" of the household.

■ **Low involvement in school.** The black male is less involved in the school setting than his counterparts. He frequently avoids participating in normal school activities. Success in school is elusive, and he functions on the edge with regard to rules and regulations and academic performance. The public school setting presents unique challenges that attack this youngster in his most vulnerable areas. For example, an overpopulation of females in the teaching role tends to extend his conflicts in interaction with females.

■ **Poor skills development.** Sequential and continuous skills development is seriously hampered as the black male

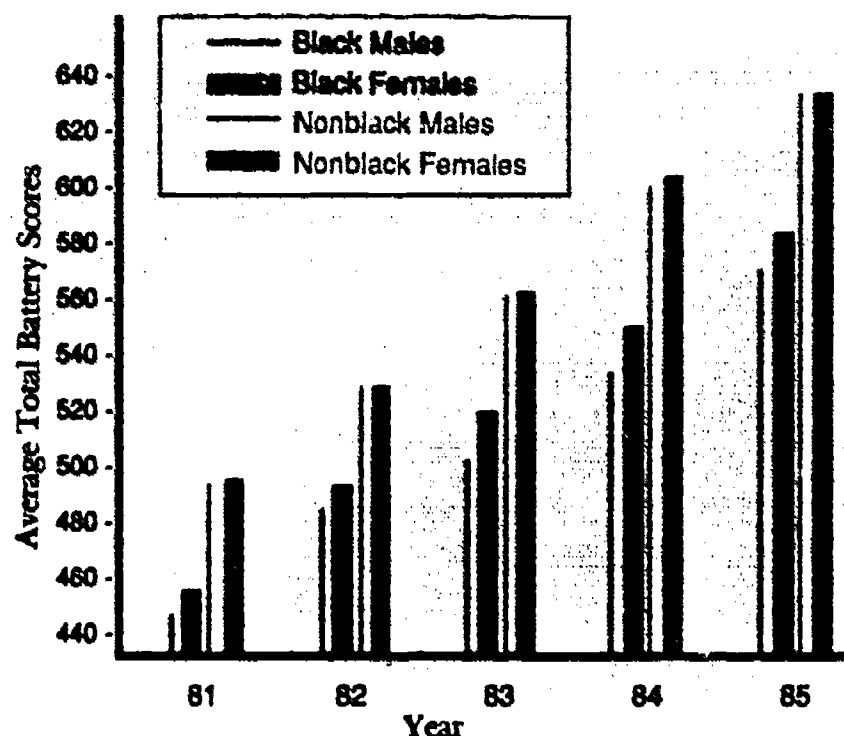
When the black male child reaches that critical stage in identity formation and looks in the environmental mirror asking the question "Who am I?", the response frequently tends to instill a low self-concept and the acceptance of a nonproductive standard of living.

child faces the dynamics of development in the home, in the school, and in the community.

In addition to these negative factors, the black male child grows up seeing many indicators of a nonproductive, wasteful standard of existence. For instance, the black male is the leading perpetrator of violent crimes as reported in the *1985 Uniform Crime Report* issued by the North Carolina Department of Justice. Although blacks make up only 25 percent of North Carolina's total population, black males were convicted in 56.8 percent of all acts of murder in 1985 which were committed by males. Black males were convicted in 63.3 percent of all cases of forcible rape, and they lead in the percentage of aggravated assaults. In many cases, these acts of violence are directed against a black female and can be assumed to occur in the home and in the presence of a child.

The black male child's difficulties do not end, though, with the absence of a contributing male model or with these negative environmental factors. The school structure itself, the second most influential institution to youth, renders the black male child more directly at risk developmentally than any other group. A study conducted from 1981 to 1985 compared the achievement levels of 1,771 students in the Wake County Public School System, contrasting the scores of black males with black females, nonblack males, and nonblack females. In each case, black males attained the lowest average scores.

Student Achievement — 9th Grade *Black Males Consistently at the Bottom*



In addition, black male children are disproportionately represented in such categories as retained students, school dropouts, and suspended and expelled students. In general, the school currently is not a strong contributor to the development of this youngster.

Instincts, observations, and findings led Superintendent Bridges to believe strongly that the dynamics of human development are somehow programmed for failure where the black male child is concerned. Even for those black males who noticeably succeed, a heavier price is paid than most can afford.

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First-Year Results (1987-88)

First-year results of the Helping Hands project already show that this partnership between the school, the home, and the community is shaping a successful program with the potential to become a viable nationwide model of intervention for the seriously at-risk, black male student.

During this first year strategies were developed by the personal models and the superintendent to implement the concept of the model. The following three primary objectives were established:

- To increase the black male students' tendency to access educational opportunities more freely.
- To boost the self-image of black male students.
- To foster school success by black male students.

The success of this first phase in meeting these key objectives is highlighted by the following facts:

- Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the student partners maintained enrollment and regular attendance in the program as evidenced by monthly logs of attendance.
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) maintained or improved conduct grades, indicating growth in the areas of self-worth and respect for others.
- Eighty-eight percent (88%) identified and met one or more behavior and/or performance goals weekly as shown by the individualized school plans maintained by personal models.

■ Ninety-five percent (95%) attained school attendance rates of 90 percent or better in average daily attendance, representing an average increase of 13 percent.

■ Sixty-five percent (65%) maintained or improved letter grades of classroom performance.

As the project progressed, parental involvement exceeded expectations. An early reluctance by parents to enroll their sons in the program was soon replaced by a sense of excitement and enthusiasm. During the first year, parents were invited to attend a variety of events. Their attendance was a measure of their growing commitment to the program.

In addition to the specific activities between the personal model and his students, a number of countywide sessions were included, such as:

- *Parent/Student Partners Orientation Night.* Personal models were introduced, and the program's goals and objectives were highlighted. A calendar for regular meetings with students was developed. Participation included all 80 student partners and 98 parents.
- *St. Ambrose Episcopal Church Recognition Breakfast.* This special breakfast recognized student partners, parents, and personal models. A noted black state legislator was the guest speaker. Participation included 60 student partners and 15 parents.
- *Olympiad.* A kaleidoscope of growth activities at this event included oratorical contests, competition in academic subject matter based on

the popular game called Trivial Pursuit, and athletic activities. Participation included 72 student partners and 82 parents.

■ *Parent workshop sessions.* Two parent workshops were conducted on "Parenting the Adolescent Child" and "Study Skills for Success in School." Thirty parents attended the workshops.

■ *Kappa Alpha Psi Achievement Banquet.* An achievement banquet recognized the accomplishments of over 400 black high school students. Student achievers gave testimony on their successes through hard work, regular school attendance, and tenacity. This event specifically helped student partners see first-hand the success that can come if they persevere.

■ *Awards ceremony.* This ceremony recognized the 1987-88 student partners and their parents. New student partners and their parents enrolled in the program for the 1988-89 school year were also recognized. Students received a certificate of appreciation and a School/Community Helping Hands T-shirt. Artwork by two student partners was highlighted and featured on the cover design of the program brochures. Participation included 150 student partners and 70 parents.

This first year of Helping Hands contributed significantly to understanding how strongly the network of negative factors affects black males. The question of whether a successful, developmental intervention model can be put in place has been answered with a resounding "yes." The Wake County Public School System will be continuing this program and the search for effective strategies to enhance school success and academic performance.



*It is a true year
to find a system
can help to form
partnership
the opportunity
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Project Design: Role Models as Positive Support

The network of negative factors affecting black male child development compels a new type of response. The School/Community Helping Hands Project is designed to address this need by increasing the tendency of the black male student to access educational opportunities.

Students targeted for entry into the program are black, male, sixth graders who are at risk of school failure, but who also have strengths which can be tapped through a positive, supporting program. Characteristics of these children include the following:

- Declining CAT scores or scores at or below the 40th percentile in reading or math.
- Strong potential for greater success in school as shown by early school performance, teacher recommendations, or other such positive signs.
- Evidence of personal strength to resist negative influences which lead to inappropriate behavior.

Such students are identified during the spring of their fifth-grade year. Once selected as a "student partner" by school officials, a conference is held with the student's parents to explain the project and to solicit parental opinion as to the value of a male model working with the youngster.

Written parental approval must be given for the student to be admitted. A maximum of 80 students can be admitted to the project each year. Project site locations throughout the county are designated based on the location of participating students.

The project matches sturdy, caring black male educators with these students during their sixth-grade year. Black male professionals (teachers, counselors, or administrators) are trained to serve as "personal models" for the students. These models are required to spend at least 20 hours per month with their assigned students. The models receive a \$1,000 annual supplement for their work. All formal project activity takes place during nonschool time. Personal models meet monthly with the superintendent or his designee to share successes and failures, to discuss long-range goals, and to review student progress.

The personal model's responsibilities revolve around three major thrusts:

- Holding activities to "bond" them with their student partners.
- Visiting and communicating with the student's parents throughout the year.
- Visiting the student's school, meeting with his teachers, and developing an individualized plan for

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school work to tackle deficiencies in the student's school work.

The model's involvement, though, is not limited just to school work. Activities are planned throughout the year specifically geared to boosting the youngster's self-image and to providing motivation for success both in school and in life.

The project involves the community during its second cycle. A "community model" is matched with the students as they enter their second year in the project. These community models are black males with strong character, solid employment histories, and a willingness to commit time to the project. Potential models complete applications and make written commitments. Men with families are preferred. Training sessions are held for community models each fall, and the model is assigned one or two student partners for the year.

Each community model is also assigned to the student's personal model. The personal model guides the community model in getting to know the student, makes home visits, and plans partnership activities.

The community model meets at least 12 to 15 hours each month with his student partners. That relationship must continue for at least one year. During this community component of the project, emphasis is focused on the home, school, and child, with attention and activities targeting four specific areas: serving as a positive role model, understanding and improving peer relations, improving success in school, and developing leadership potential.

Thus, over a two-year period youngsters can benefit from a continuing partnership offering the opportunity to emulate sturdy, caring models both from the school and from the community.

Activities are planned throughout the year specifically geared to boosting the youngster's self-image and to providing motivation for success both in school and in life.

Private Support: A Community Partnership

In all respects, the School/Community Helping Hands Project truly is a community partnership. In addition to involvement through community models, the program is almost entirely supported by private funds. The school system provides some funding in the areas of travel, supplies and materials, and the use of school facilities. However, all personnel costs are taken from private contributions.

The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation has provided \$30,000 to fund the coordinator and related costs. A two-year commitment of \$9,000 a year was made by the A.J. Fletcher Foundation. Smaller contributions have been received from the Wake County Division of Principals, Kaiser-Permanente, individual citizens, local PTA organizations, local civic groups, and black fraternities and sororities.

Profiles of Program Participants

The following individual profiles reflect examples of the characteristics of students accepted into the Helping Hands program:

- **Moderate problems:** Student experienced moderate problems attending to specific tasks, working without supervision, complying with school rules, tolerating frustration, and controlling impulses.

Family background: Father is deceased, but mother has regularly attended parent conferences and can be easily contacted.

CAT scores: Scores dropped in three years from the 97th percentile to the sixth percentile in math and from the 93rd percentile to the 11th percentile in reading.

Teacher comment: Teacher believed student has a lot to offer and has more potential than now exhibiting. "He could use an extra boost."

- **Moderate to severe problem:** Youngster had moderate to severe problems attending to tasks, organizing himself and materials, completing class and home assignments, complying with school rules, coping with new situations, tolerating frustration, and controlling impulses.

Family background: Student lives with his grandmother, but does have some contact with his father. Mother is deceased. Difficulty experienced by school in communicating with his family (no telephone).

CAT scores: Scores dropped in one year from the 99th percentile in math to the 79th percentile and from the 51st percentile in reading to the 30th percentile.

Teacher comment: Teacher felt he was capable if he could be guided in the right direction; also expressed the need for an additional male figure since the child does not live with his father.

- **Moderate to severe problems:** Child experienced moderate to severe problems attending to tasks, working without supervision, organizing himself and materials, completing class and home assignments, coping with new situations, tolerating frustration, and controlling impulses.

Family background: Parents have provided support to the school when notified about misbehavior.

CAT scores: Scores dropped in two years from the 91st percentile to the 44th percentile in math and from the 92nd percentile to the eighth percentile in reading.

Teacher comment: Teacher indicated he has athletic potential and would benefit from direct, consistent guidance in homework and test preparation.

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